

Indochina Refugee Action Center

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HIGHLANDER REFUGEES FROM LAOS: BACKGROUND

1. Who are they?

Laos in 1975 consisted of less than three million people, more than half of whom were of non-Lao minority background. Since 1975, almost 300,000 have fled as refugees to Thailand; over half have been hill people.

Of the 150,000 Highlanders who fled, about 60,000 remain in refugee camps in Thailand. About 70,000 have resettled in the United States and another 20,000 in other countries, principally France, Australia and Canada.

The vast majority of these refugees are Hmong (formerly known as Meo). There are also Iu Mien (formerly known as Yao), Khmu (also known as Lao Theung), Lahu and Tin peoples.

Each of these groups has distinct linguistic and cultural heritages, but they shared a similar life style in Laos--living in the hills and pursuing subsistence agricultural and pastoral life styles--until the war years.

2. The Effects of War

During the French Indochina war which ended in 1954, some of the Hmong and Iu Mien people were enlisted in the fight against the Viet Minh.

In the early sixties, this prior affiliation with the French led to an alliance with the U.S. The Highlander armies of Vang Pao became the chief defense in Laos against the full force of the North Vietnamese army. (The lowland Lao forces--communist and non-communist alike--managed to avoid the brunt of this fighting.) The Highlanders fought courageously and exacted a high price from the North Vietnamese, but were bled white.

Although no exact figures were kept, Hmong/Highlanders are estimated to have suffered 10,000 dead and seriously wounded. By comparison, U.S. losses on this proportion in the Vietnam war would have been in the neighborhood of eight million.

- 2 -

The wartime role of the Highlanders has led to continuing systematic persecution in Laos. For several years after the communist takeover in Laos, artillery, air strikes and ground attacks were mounted against the Hmong and other Highlanders; chemical weapons--called "yellow rain" by the Hmong--were also used.

3. Resettlement: The Lack of an Appropriate Strategy

From their earliest days as refugees, Hmong and other Highlander leaders indicated that their primary wish was to remain together on the land.

Efforts to resettle in Thailand have not been successful and, to avoid indefinite stagnation in the refugee camps there, the Hmong/Highlanders opted for resettlement in the Western world.

The bulk of Highlander refugees arrived in the United States during 1980-81, the recent peak years for overall refugee resettlement in the U.S. During the period of influx, the Highlanders were lost amidst more numerous Southeast Asian groups; they were not singled out for special help, nor were they the beneficiaries of imaginative approaches.

Federally supported resettlement agencies dispersed the Highlanders across the country, most often to urban areas. Language and job training were virtually ineffective and have resulted in limited job placement. Such an approach was destined to fail for agricultural peoples who wished to stay together.

The Highlanders remain dependent and demoralized. They have a strong work ethic and despise losing their economic independence. As one former Hmong soldier said recently after being denied an opportunity to work as a volunteer apprentice, "For the Hmong, the only way off welfare will be to hang ourselves."

The Highlanders' "despair of the future" has recently become more visible in wholesale movements from initial resettlement sites to other areas. This unique phenomenon--known as "secondary migration"--is rapidly redistributing this population from urban areas to rural environs. The San Joaquin Valley in California now has over 20,000 Highlanders, chiefly in Merced, Fresno and Stockton. Other Hmong have moved to places such as Arkansas, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Alabama and Wisconsin in their quest for agricultural opportunities.

- 3 -

Unless effective measures are taken soon, additional migration will occur. To dampen this movement, existing communities must be stabilized; at the same time, pressing needs in the new impact areas (such as the Central Valley) must be met.

4. The Challenge

A totally new strategy and approach for Hmong/Highlander resettlement is essential. Whether in agricultural, service, cottage and light industry or small business areas, this group of refugees possesses innate strengths which can be enhanced. Such strengths include:

- Homogenous and cohesive social structures with an unusual proclivity towards group self help and community building, e.g. willingness to pool both labor and capital.
- Strong work ethic and willingness to perform at entry-level agricultural and service jobs, provided that realistic opportunities to progress are perceived.
- Desire for independence, self-sufficiency, and getting off welfare.
- Willingness to build their own shelters and reclaim unused or marginal farmland.
- Interest in learning English.
- Ability and desire to learn from Americans and build working relationships.
- Strong performance of children in school.

Given these attributes, and, if we can look beyond traditional resettlement models to new ideas and alternative sources of support, it should be possible to rapidly move this highly dependent group towards self-sufficiency.

Success is important for the Highlanders; it is also vital to maintain public and Congressional confidence in the U.S. domestic refugee program.

California -- 25,500. Fresno: 8,500; Merced: 6,000; Stockton: 4,000; Santa Ana: 4,000; San Diego: 2,000; Banning: 600; San Francisco: 400.

Minnesota -- 10,000, mostly in St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Wisconsin -- 5,000 in Eau Claire, La Crosse, Milwaukee, Appleton, Sheboygan, Madison, Wausau, Green Bay.

Illinois -- 3,000 in Chicago, Rockford, Belvidere, Kankakee, Ottawa, Rochelle, Wheaton, Danville, Moline, Dixon, Joliet, Decatur.

Rhode Island -- 2,500 in the Providence area.

Michigan -- 2,000 in Detroit, Lansing, Saginaw, Richville, Grand Rapids, Warren, Grand Ledge.

Colorado -- 1,800 in the Denver area, Boulder.

Pennsylvania -- 1,500 in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh.

Utah -- 1,500 in the Salt Lake City area.

Washington -- 1,500 in the Seattle area, Spokane, Tacoma.

Iowa -- 1,300 in the Des Moines area and other sites.

Oklahoma -- 1,200 in Tulsa, Lawton, Oklahoma City.

Kansas -- 1,200 in Kansas City.

Ohio -- 1,000+ in Toledo, Columbus, Akron.

Oregon -- 900 in Portland and environs.

North Carolina -- 650 in Marion, Morganton, Charlotte.

Montana -- 600 in Missoula, Billings.

Massachusetts -- 600 in the Boston area, Fitchburg.

Connecticut -- 500 in Manchester and other communities.

Nebraska -- 500 in Omaha.

Georgia -- 400 in the Atlanta area.

Texas -- 400 in Fort Worth.

Alabama -- 250 in Selma.

Tennessee -- 250 in the Memphis area.

Arkansas -- 200 in Fort Smith and Little Rock.

New York -- 150 in Syracuse.

Virginia -- 70 in Alexandria, Arlington, Hampton.

OTHER HIGHLANDER POPULATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Iu Mien, Lao Theung, Lahu and Tin peoples are other Highlander minority groups from Laos resettling in this country since 1975. There are approximately 10,000 of these people, with the Iu Mien being the largest of these groups. They have resettled primarily in Portland, Seattle, and throughout California, in clusters. The Lahu, a very primitive tribe with a population of about 200 -- who have even more extreme needs -- have most recently clustered in Visalia, CA.